

Odd tales from secret files

By John Sherwood
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The Central Intelligence Agency has reluctantly opened for research more than 450 boxes of "once-secret" files of World War II's Office of Strategic Services.

The agents at the CIA, successors to the dashing spies at OSS, have hoarded the covert operations intelligence records for nearly 40 years.

Winnowing out the drama in these faded papers depends greatly on luck. A proper card index file is non-existent.

Two days of eye-strain in a grim and chilly researcher's room. Then a random opening of Box 37 of 109 of the OSS History Office Files turns up this intriguing folder:

"NATO [North African Theater Operations] Anthology. Algiers. Vol. 1." A coded opening page is marked: "Secret — Equals British Most Secret."

Hmmmm... "The Simmons Beautyrest Project: Sir Smokey Chases the Holy Grail."

"Simmons" was the code name for a top secret mission under Lt. William W. (Smokey) Downey, U.S.N.R., Secret Operations Officer, North Africa. His mission impossible: Storm a secret Nazi bomb plant ("Beautyrest") and capture the super-secret "glider bomb" that was later to become famous as the terrifying V-1 rocket that buzz-bombed England.

The mission would take almost a year, cost many lives, and dispatch agents around the world to Egypt, Great Britain, Algeria, Norway, Belgium, Holland, Denmark, France, Italy, Greece, and America.

Let's have a look, then, at Lt. Downey's report, secret for four decades:

The mission, of the highest secret priority, was created after a "radio-guided bomb" landed at 1 p.m. on Aug. 22, 1943 on the remote Norwegian island of Bornholm on an experimental flight. Incredibly,

an alert Danish scientist happened by the strange, unarmed dud that suddenly dived into the ground. He took photographs of the damaged bomb and gathered a lot of technical data.

"He had but a few hours to do this," Lt. Downey wrote, "and was successful in eluding the Germans who were on the ground in the neighborhood awaiting to report on the experiment. However, the Gestapo later captured this Danish

projectiles; most agreed that they had some kind of wings and tail. Most also agreed that they seemed to change their course in midair after launching."

A committee met in deepest secrecy on Malta to study the bomb fragments, and those involved were forbidden to discuss the new weapon with anyone.

By early November, the OSS already had a plan and Lt. Downey had a mission. The main objective,

he continued, "was to get physical possession of these bombs, if possible, and in this effort we were continuously running up against a stone wall in our efforts."

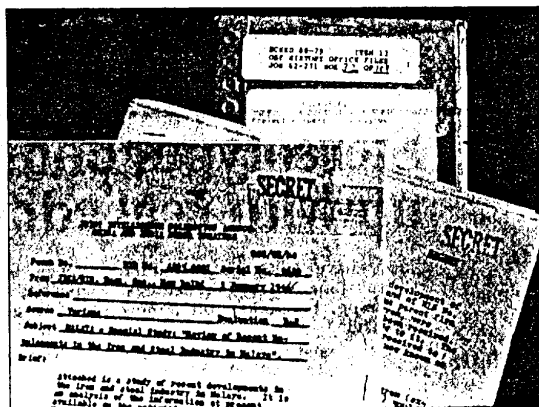
"It was not because people did not want to cooperate with us but everywhere we turned we were told the same old story — 'it can't be done,' or 'it is impossible.' It was at this point that our nickname for the bomb came into being — 'Holy Grail.'"

The first attempt to steal the bomb was in the middle of January in Norway "where the temperature is anything but tepid, and [we] trudged over sixty miles of the roughest terrain conceivable to get to Banack, the German-held airport on the Arctic Ocean... After five weeks the teams reached the airport and returned to their base, but reported no trace of the bomb, nor of the plane which carried the radio-controlled bomb."

Early in February 1944, they decided to concentrate on getting the radio mechanism, rather than the rocket bomb itself. "because it weighed but 50 pounds and was about 3 feet overall, whereas the rocket bomb, dubbed the 'Robomb,' or the 'Buzzbomb,' and technically known as the V-1, was believed to weigh 3,000 pounds, or even more."

The first of several tragedies came when two OSS agents were dropped behind the lines in France. One of them died when he struck a tree upon landing, and the other was forced to return.

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His mission impossible: Storm a secret Nazi bomb plant and capture the super-secret "glider bomb."

patriot and he was shot to death."

The secret data, however, got through. It reached London through the Norwegian Government in Exile's Secret Intelligence Corps. Inexplicably, the intelligence never got to the United States through the regular channels dominated by the British.

"Nevertheless, and in spite of some opposition from our own people in England," Lt. Downey noted, "the photos and technical information was forwarded to the U.S. First, and for reasons I'll never be able to quite understand, I was told not to send the material to Washington."

Also in September, the "radio-directed flying bombs launched from airplanes were first used by the Germans in the Mediterranean in a devastating attack on a crewed British patrol boat. The unusual missiles were described as "small airplanes, rockets, and shell-like

OSS

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Information from Algiers revealed that the bomb was seen in southern France, near Toulouse, and also at Bordeaux. The first accurate information of the exact whereabouts of the elusive bomb came from "our Maquis agent, Webster," who located it at the Blagnac Airport near Toulouse.

Later, this same Webster came up with the information that the Germans had stored hundreds of these bombs at a factory near Portes Des Valence, Lt. Downey reported.

He spent two weeks in Algiers in April perfecting plans for "Beautyrest," the name designated for the operational plan in early May, "whereby a squadron of bombers based in Sardinia was to bomb the [Marchal] factory at Portes Des Valence... and under cover of a diversionary attack Webster's partisans of the Maquis [a French underground fighter] were to go into the plant grounds and attempt to snatch the Holy Grail."

This high-priority plan "was the first time in this war that an operation was coordinated between air forces and the underground forces for an operational objective," he wrote. "Every detail of the 'Beautyrest' plan was gone into minutely and the operation laid on for the night of May 10-11. My job in the operation was to arrange the timing, notify Algiers in time so that they could notify Webster in ample time to get in touch with his people of the Maquis."

There is some question about Lt. Downey's timing, however.

"Everything was in readiness for the operation and the signal given," he continued. "The first force of bombers, however, never reached the target because of a terrific freak storm that came up in the Rhone Valley that caused the target to be obliterated. One of the bombers was shot down and two others were forced down because of the storm. The others were unable to get into the target area at all."

Webster's 12 armed saboteurs "came down from the hills dressed as firemen to storm the factory and were amazed to find the plant was still intact but that the bombings were taking place on targets about a mile east of the factory. The diversionary attack was being carried out on schedule, the crews not knowing that the first force was unable to get through to the principal target."

But there are conflicting dates here.

The Maquis underground agent Webster reported three attempts in May, not Lt. Downey's one.

On the night of May 6-7, Webster reported no bombardment and that his returning Maquis were surprised by a German patrol and two partisans of the Free Group were killed. On the night of May 10-11, the factory again was not bombed, and again they turned back. A third attempt came on the night of May 13-14, but still there was no bombardment.

"It would perhaps be interesting to try again," wrote an obviously frustrated Webster, "if you could assure a powerful bombardment, breaching the wall parallel to the Rhone, preferably, causing the mines bordering this wall on the outside to explode, and carrying

out, in the ten minutes following this bombardment, a powerful diversion on the railway and the roundhouse.

"But it is important," he added, "for the security of our men and the success of the coup de main, to respect to the second the time agreed upon for the end of the bombardment, and for the beginning of the diversion."

"Beautyrest" was abandoned for about a month and reset for the night of June 9-10. But again fate intervened and it was cancelled when, after the D-Day invasion of Normandy, all German troops in the Portes Des Valence area were moved out, along with the secret bombs. New leads now placed the bombs in the Middle East, on the island of Crete, and at an airport near Salonika, Greece.

The secret Greek mission was tagged "Chewing Gum," and was just as sticky. Setting off from Alexandria, Egypt, they arrived at a base in Turkey only to be held up by the British and Germans, who were threatening to fire upon any and all vessels. By moving the landing, a delay of three more weeks came because the agents had to get through the mountains in the Salonika area. By the time they finally reached the airport, they discovered that the Germans had moved the bombs again.

"I left for Italy on September 7, 1944," Lt. Downey reported. "We had been receiving reports from Northern Italy about the possibility of the 'Holy Grail' being found somewhere near the Milano area."

Returning to Caserta, Lt. Downey heard the news that forces of the Maquis had taken the Blagnac airport near Toulouse, but without

the leadership of Webster, who had been killed a short time before D-Day in June.

Two OSS agents were the first Allied uniformed men to arrive at the base after the Maquis took it, and they spotted the bombs and the mother ships at the original Webster location. A few days later, British pilots landed at the airport and flew the bomb's mother ship to England and turned over an intact bomb to an ordnance evaluation depot in Ohio.

Lt. Downey apologized to his OSS superior for "our people not being in on the kill as far as actually getting physical possession of the 'Holy Grail' was concerned."

In a secret message to OSS "Col. Glavin" dated Sept. 22, 1944, Lt. Downey stated: "If you remember, it was our information that originally placed these bombs near Toulouse so I feel that we in OSS did have no little to do with the securing of this highly-prized captured equipment, even though we did not actually get the equipment out of the airport."

In an introduction to the "Simmons Beautyrest Project: Sir Smokey Chases the Holy Grail" (dated Feb. 10, 1945), an OSS agent using the initials "CSC" praised Lt. Downey. He "was able to inform the Allied HQ in London of the location of launching sites along the French channel coast. This was of great value in the invasion of France and in the second trial by ordeal of England... The mission, while it took longer than had been hoped, was thus far from a failure."

An interesting story, CSC observed, "though apparently Sir Smokey did not himself achieve his objective."

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